

## Semiotics Open to Interpretation: The Example of the 'Cracker' TV Drama

### *Yoruma Açık Göstergebilim: Cracker TV Draması Örneği*

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#### Abstract

Semiotics, which aims to analyze the universe of meaning, is a synchronic examination of sign meanings. In media theory within the context of meaning production and transformation, a dilemma arises. It has always been debated whether semiotics originates from the necessity of socially accepted norms or from the requirement of universal comprehension. A semiotic approach that does not acknowledge the multiple functions a text can create simultaneously, or that does not consider the participation of the audience within a specific context, lacks coherence. Semiotic approaches other than those of Saussure or Peirce are referred to as "interpretative" or "inquisitive" semiotics. This approach embraces the idea that signs do not present the world to us as we already know it but instead introduce it in a new way. In this study, the semiotic approach will be discussed with a critical perspective in the context of the multi-faceted debates that took place throughout the 20th century. The contributions of numerous contemporary philosophers and scholars who have significantly advanced the field of semiotics will also be addressed. The study will examine the meaning-making methods of TV dramas, taking the British crime drama *Cracker* as a case study. The selection of *Cracker* is based on the premise that it represents an intriguing and complex text at a time when TV dramas were relatively limited. It is considered significant due to its realistic portrayal of naturalism and its foundational influence on subsequent TV series. Analyzed through dialogic analysis, the *Cracker* TV drama demonstrates how meanings can change, particularly in social phenomena, depending on where and when signs are used—both at the time of its broadcast and during a moment of cultural transformation. The use of norms in a television drama should be understood through their role within the narrative and their impact on social dialogue.

**Keywords:** Semiotics, Semantics, Saussure, Bakhtin, Television dramas

#### Öz

Anlam evreninin çözümlenmesini amaçlayan göstergebilim, gösterge anlamlarının eşsüremsel bir incelemesidir. Anlamların üretimi ve değişimi bağlamındaki medya kuramında bir ikilem söz konusudur. Göstergebilimin toplumca bilinen düzgülerin gereğinden mi, yoksa evrensel olarak anlaşılma gereğinden mi doğduğu hep tartışılmıştır. Bir metnin aynı anda yaratacağı işlevleri kabul etmeyen, izleyici ve izleyicinin belli bir bağlamda katılımını hesaba katmayan göstergebilim bütünlükten uzaktır. Saussure ya da Peirce dışındaki göstergebilim yaklaşımına 'yoruma açık' ya da 'sorgulayıcı' göstergebilim denilmektedir. Bu yaklaşımda, göstergelerin bize dünyayı bildiğimiz biçimiyle değil, yeni bir biçimde sunduğu düşüncesi benimsenir. Bu çalışmada 20. yüzyılda çok yönlü bir şekilde sürdürülmüş olan tartışmalar bağlamında semiyotik yaklaşım eleştirel bir bakış açısı sunarak tartışılacak; bu bilime büyük katkıları olan birçok çağdaş filozof ve bilim insanının göstergebilim adına yaptığı çalışmalara değinilecektir. TV dramalarının anlam üretme biçiminin tartışılacağı çalışmada, İngiliz suç drama dizisi *Cracker* örneği ele alınmıştır. TV dramalarının günümüze göre oldukça sınırlı olduğu bir dönemde, dizinin oldukça ilginç ve karmaşık bir metin olması, doğalcılıkta gerçeği yansıtmaması ve sonraki yıllarda yapılan dizilere temel oluşturması bağlamında önemli olması ön kabulü ile seçilmiştir. Diyalojik analiz ile irdelenen *Cracker* TV draması, yayınlandığı an ve ekinel bir değişim anındaki konumuyla, göstergelerin nerede ve ne zaman kullanıldıklarına göre özellikle toplumsal olgularda anlamların değişebileceğini göstermiştir. Bir televizyon dramasında düzgü kullanımı, o oyun aracılığıyla kendi kapsamında kullanılışıyla ve toplumsal diyalogtaki etkisiyle kabul edilmelidir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Göstergebilim, Anlambilim, Saussure, Bakhtin, TV Drama.

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## Introduction

The construction rules of the practice of semiotics can be ordered systemically and classified. However, there also exists a tendency towards a denial of these rules and an expansion in ways never imagined. Semiosis refers to the process of creating meaning through signs and symbols. Playing a crucial role in human communication and language use, the concept of semiosis focuses on how signs are interpreted and how their meanings are constructed. Not all the systems which deal with the hierarchy of signs manage to arrive at the eternal 'principles' that structuralism proposes. The very structures that organize the hierarchy of signs devise contents—in them, the texts, such as TV soap operas, embed two topics—one bears representation of a certain content, and, at the same time, can be incorporated into a different one (Williams, 2013). To illustrate, they can depict the working class but can also go to the extent of lobbying against the very same depiction. Semiotics must develop a methodology to understand the formation and functioning of a system. As Umberto Eco (1996) also states (Harris, 1996), a text can be interpreted infinitely, but not all interpretations are equally valid (Harris, 1996).

In this study, semiotic interpretation in television dramas will be examined in the context of the multifaceted debates that took place throughout the 20th century, from Saussure to Bakhtin. Additionally, the contributions of numerous contemporary philosophers and scholars to the field of semiotics will be addressed. First, it is essential to highlight the difference between Saussure's structuralism (2004) and Peirce's pragmatism (Muller, 2000). Then, in order to establish a clearer framework for the study, the distinctions among the approaches of Peirce, Bakhtin and Wittgenstein will be explored (Gorlée, 2012).

In Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralism, language is considered a system of signs. According to Saussure, a sign consists of two components: the signifier and the signified. The relationship between signs and their meanings is arbitrary, meaning there is no natural connection; rather, meaning is established through social convention. Saussure analyzes language independently of its historical development, focusing on its functioning at a given moment. He distinguishes between the historical evolution of language (diachronic) and its structure at a specific point in time (synchronic) (De Saussure, 2004).

Charles Sanders Peirce's pragmatism is based on logic and philosophy, emphasizing that meaning emerges within the context of use. A sign becomes functional only when it gains meaning within a specific context and through an interpreter. Peirce connects semiotics with logic and cognitive processes. According to him, a sign consists of three components: the sign, the object, and the interpreter (Gorlée, 2012). Peirce also categorizes signs based on their mode of representation into three types: icon, index, and symbol. He grounds semiotics in logic and pragmatism, asserting that signs derive their meaning from how they are interpreted by users and the context in which they are used. Meaning is dependent on the context of the sign's use and the process of interpretation. Signs do not have fixed meanings; rather, they are continuously reinterpreted by interpreters (Gorlée, 2012). In this context, while Saussure considers language as a closed system, Peirce interprets signs within an open and dynamic process (Pavis, 1980).

A textual approach does not capture why social systems have devised certain signs in the first place. Bakhtin's method measures the 'signified' by looking into about what kind of dialogues



this sign might correspond to (Bakhtin, 1986).The process of sign creation and its revision of this relation in practice is still ongoing.

Bakhtin argues that meaning is formed through a dialogic process. According to him, no sign or word carries meaning on its own; instead, meaning is determined by interactions within social and historical contexts. The key concepts Bakhtin emphasizes are dialogism, heteroglossia, and the carnivalesque. Language and signs are not one-directional; every discourse is interconnected with past and future discourses (Holquist, 2003). There are multiple voices and perspectives in language and narratives, and meaning is shaped through the conflict of these voices. Authoritative and fixed meanings within language and society are constantly questioned and reproduced. According to Bakhtin, the source of meaning is not under the control of a single individual or system; rather, it is continuously negotiated through different voices and perspectives. Texts and signs are context-dependent and possess multilayered meanings (Holquist, 2003).

Wittgenstein argues that meaning arises from the use of language. According to him, words or signs do not have fixed meanings; instead, meaning is determined within the context of their use. Through his concept of *language games*, he emphasizes that the meaning of language depends on how it is used (Gorlée, 2012).The meaning of a word or sign varies based on its function within a social activity or practice. Meaning is not derived from a sign's reference alone but rather from patterns of usage. The source of meaning depends on how a word or sign is used in a particular context. The same sign can acquire different meanings in different *language games* (Allen, 2006).

Peirce explains the meaning of signs within a logical system, emphasizing the role of the interpreter (Gorlée,2012). Bakhtin highlights the ever-changing and pluralistic nature of meaning within social dialogue (Bakhtin, 1986). Wittgenstein argues that meaning is shaped by the use of language and gains function within different "language games" (Gorlée, 2012). These three thinkers, each emphasizing different aspects of semiotics, have sought to explain how meaning is formed.

"Semiotics deals with a pre-existing system and a pre-existing flow of communication" (Bakhtin, 1986). However, in conversations, communication is created through a mutual flow, and fundamentally, there are no pre-existing systems. Systems are created for certain purposes, such as art. Robert Stam, in his research on Bakhtin's approach, states, "Thus, the system of the text is the moment when the rules are extracted, altered, and replaced by something else" (Stam, 1989). Amy Mandelker (1995), in her own study on Bakhtin, adds that he adapted the lifecycle of signs to natural sciences: "Because he believed that signs, rather than being rooted in meaning, develop according to the laws of growth, as found in nature" (Mandelker, 1995).

The fundamental act that defines Bakhtin's concept of 'beyond linguistics' is the manner of speaking (Bakhtin, 1986).The airing of a play is a rebellion—and there are details within it that expresses this. Bakhtin speaks of a point where language and speech overlap. For example, from the way "I promise to give you 5 pounds" sounds, we understand that the person will, indeed, fulfill the promise (Bakhtin, 1986). The meaning of promising lies in the action itself; the act is compelling. On the other hand, when faced with something hard to believe, we

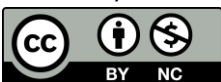
might introduce a tremor of surprise into our voice. We do this to fully convey the meaning to the sentence, as a form of 'speech.' In short, how something is said is more important than the sentence itself. The manner of speaking can also be a response, and while the sentence structure may be simple, it is semantically complex: for instance, the single word "Go," depending on how it is said, can imply many meanings not directly present in the semantic context.

According to Bakhtin, "an intimate, close manner of speech is no longer part of language (nor is it part of the flow or chain of speech) it is part of communication that carries contextual meaning but lacks a formal definition (Bakhtin, 1986)." In this context, for example, speech that contains meaning related to values, such as truth or beauty, and speech that requires a reactive understanding, is part of communication—it is expressed as something that contains an evaluation (Bakhtin, 1986) As Bakhtin states, "Everything related to today dies with today" (Bakhtin, 1986).

Pavis uses the term "socio-semiotics" to describe the creation of signs or the extraction of meaning from texts in certain cultures (Pavis, 1980). This is like the approach Kristeva sought to develop, based on formalism and history, to free the audience and the text from theoretical constraints. Kristeva adopted Bakhtin's dialogic structure and developed it within a semiotic framework, arguing that language and text are multilayered, constantly changing, and polyphonic (Kristeva, 2024). In Kristeva's work (Jones, 1984), semiotic analysis is viewed as a process where meaning is not fixed, but fixed but constantly shaped through social and individual interactions. Like Saussure, Bakhtin believes in the dominance of certain styles in free conversations or behaviors, but these can only be resolved within specific contexts. For instance, his concept of "intonation of utterance" is not tied to words themselves but to the sound (Bakhtin, 1986). As we mentioned earlier, Volosinov's materialist approach to (Volosinov, 1973) language suggests that signs assist communication and exist outside the individual. Such signs, when created, cannot be widely or sufficiently used immediately; rather, they do not form a general concept at once. Most general concepts are created within a specific segment, often settled within an academic group or subculture, but it takes time for them to permeate society and culture. We cannot assume that all signs will become widespread in the same way; some may hold meaning only for a particular group within a specific period. Here, there are clear parallels between spoken language and semiotics. Therefore, semiotics accepts the creation of signs as a social phenomenon and focus on how signs are made meaningful—not on what they mean.

Like Wittgenstein's language games (Gorlée, 2012) semiotics should develop theories that demonstrate what signs can mean. It would be incorrect to tie this to a single theory. According to Bakhtin, a 'system' is "an element intentionally created that kills context" (Bakhtin, 1986). In other words, the existence of a system determines the meaning of a sign and neutralizes any potential influence on it within a new context. If all systems could be predetermined, then there would be no need for a pragmatics of signs. This perspective contrasts with other dominant semiotic approaches.

Bakhtin's opposition to predetermined systems is based on the idea that every act of communication moves toward a previously non-existent context (Mandelker, 1995). Often, we assume that a socially established concept exists in the direction of the intellectual creativity of our own social group (Volosinov, 1973), having both Bakhtin and Medvedev (Allen, 2006) referring to this as 'thematic determinism'. However, this only emerges when directed



toward a real space and time – "Whether in a church, on stage, or on screen, whether the subject is heard or silenced, it is part of a known phenomenon or created purely for entertainment" (Bakhtin, 1986).

Instead of being a methodological explanation, this study is a discussion and interpretation based on the semiotic method. Also, the chosen TV crime drama was produced by Granada Television for ITV, which won the British Academy Television Award for Best Drama Series in 1995-1996, making it exceedingly relevant for this context. The lack of studies using semiotics on TV drama series from the 1990s in this field led to the selection of this example.

## 1. Theoretical Framework: Semiotics Open to Interpretation

The difference between Eco's concept of "unlimited semiosis" (Eco, 1996) and Bakhtin's "dialogic" (Holquist, 2003), approach is crucial in this context. The fundamental distinction between Umberto Eco's idea of "unlimited interpretation" and Mikhail Bakhtin's "dialogic" approach lies in their perspectives on the nature and boundaries of meaning production (Holquist, 2003). Eco, expanding on Peirce's semiotic theory, argues that signs can never be reduced to a single, definitive meaning. The meaning of a sign is always explained by referring to other signs, creating an infinite cycle. Meaning is never fixed; it is constantly deferred and expanded (Eco, 1996). While Eco acknowledges that interpretation is unlimited, he also asserts that entirely arbitrary or context-free interpretations can be invalid. He accepts that texts allow for endless interpretation but emphasizes that each text has a certain structural organization and an author's intention. Meaning is continuously reproduced through the text's internal structure and the reader's interpretive process. However, Eco introduces the concept of "misreading," arguing that not all interpretations are correct or valid (Eco, 1996). Bakhtin's thesis on the dialogic approach similarly rejects the idea that meaning can be reduced to a single authority or absolute interpretation, but he also does not consider it entirely limitless. Meaning is formed through a dialogic process, shaped by the interaction of different voices and discourses. It is influenced by discursive interaction, social context, and cultural history. While there is no single authoritative meaning, meaning is not entirely boundless either, as discourses take shape within specific contexts (Holquist, 2003).

In this context, the view that linguistics cannot provide a foundation for semiotic analysis does not entirely reject the relationship between both language and signs; it simply separates the field of linguistics. Bakhtin's approach to semiotics is situated within language discussions. (Holquist, 2003). His goal is to develop the practice of signification as a broader concept that includes language (Bakhtin, 1986). This teaching is known as "beyond linguistics", as it surpasses it. It also responds to Saussure's early argument for the necessity of a "science of signs (De Saussure, 2004)." Saussure spoke of a science that would encompass all systems of signification, including those beyond words, asserting that, if semiotics developed as a science, it would "include all examples of expression that rely on natural forms of communication, such as pantomime" (De Saussure, 2004). Bakhtin's view of "beyond linguistics" (Bakhtin, 1986) helps us understand that all human behavior simply responds to previous phenomena (Holquist, 2003).

One of Bakhtin's well-known statements is: "Content determines the text." (Holquist, 2003). Paraphrasing Gary Saul Morson, "For Bakhtin, everything is pragmatic, and semantic and dramatic systems are 'hardened text'" (Morson & Dalton, 1982). This means that no semantic



or syntactic rule can organize the meaning of signs in a way that their usage can be predicted. The use of signs should be studied not strictly through formalism, but by separately analyzing the characteristics of the text and the signs, as well as examining the relationship between signs and their usage. Also pointed out by Kristeva, this approach involves exploring the relationship between formalism and history (Jones, 1984).

Nonetheless, words spoken about Bakhtin's method must be carefully considered. A topic related to political economy is instructive here. Indeed, the idea can be summarized as "everything is economics," but this does not mean that everything is suppressed by economics or that no other factors or relationships exist. The science of economics is the collection of causes and effects within a narrative (Thibault, 2007). Accordingly, significant parallels have been found between Volosinov's theory of signs and Saussure's theory of arbitrariness.. Curiously, Paul J. Thibault has identified very convincing parallels between these two thinkers (Thibault, 2007) and has shown that Volosinov could not ignore lexical-linguistic sources, which makes a pragmatic relationship possible. In other words, semantics and syntax are not irrelevant just because one is predominant. However, this relationship is not entirely clear by Bakhtin, and his works require more in-depth analysis.

This is crucial because it differentiates Bakhtin's understanding of semiotics from Peirce's pragmatism. Typically, Peirce is generally seen as a proponent of philosophical pragmatism, as he suggests that the concept of the sign (more precisely, the interpretant) is "created in the mind of the interpreter" (Nöth, 2016). This view, which assumes that all human expression is ruled by logic, is hardly agreeable with other perspectives. Nevertheless, as the meaning of the text gently shifts from the author to the text and then to the audience, Peirce's ideas have been adopted by contemporary theorists like Jensen (Jensen, 1997). In Bakhtin's semiotic approach, it does not conclude that the meaning of a sign is merely as people perceive it. Such a view would give ordinary people an unrealistic amount of power - as Foucault pointed out - by ignoring the role of institutions (Ophir, 1988). Even when signs are created in artistic practices, they evolve through the conceptual gaps left open by institutions.

Peirce is known for creating a triadic model of semiotics. The distinction between an icon, index, and symbol varies according to their degrees of motivation. An icon is motivated by its resemblance to what it represents, while a symbol is understood based on a convention or habit that aligns it with what it signifies (Muller, 2000). Julia Kristeva, in her early works, adopted many of Peirce's concepts (Butler, 1992). She sees the development of Western culture as a movement from the symbol toward the entirely arbitrary sign, noting that the symbol has a resemblance to the "signified" (Moi, 1995). Peirce's other triad—sign, object, and interpretant—is also essential to Kristeva's discussions (Kristeva, 2002). The supposed resemblance of the symbol to the "signified" makes it self-sufficient, excluding the sign itself. However, for Peirce, the sign is part of an interconnected system. Each interpretant can, in turn, become a sign for another purpose. The linkage of Peirce's sign, object, and interpretant triad is alike Derrida's concept of *différance* (Merrell, 2008). The endless transformation of meaning is, in a sense, *différance*, but Peirce's theory (2004) marks an important step in the concept of the sign because it emphasizes that a sign is meaningful due to its function. This aligns somewhat with a syntactic theory (Kristeva, 2002).

Bakhtin primarily argues that we should understand an imaginative text in the way the author intended it to be understood (Bakhtin, 1986). This does not mean that the author has a fixed and definite argument they wish to convey, but rather that the author's plan clarifies the



context that needs to be perceived. In this process, there may be a sense of neutrality or even scientific rigor, but that is not the entirety of the matter. Bakhtin also states that "the interpretation of symbolic structures leads to endless symbolic contextual meanings, and thus it is not possible for such a science to be genuinely scientific in the strict sense" (Bakhtin, 1986). This perspective aligns Bakhtin's semiotic view with traditional semiotics on the theoretical level. From this point, the task remains to extract and defend a methodology.

The following principles define the foundations of explanatory semiotics based on Bakhtin's approaches (Bakhtin, 1986):

- The creation of signs (semiosis) is the diachronic process of creating signs that meet human objectives.
- Semiotics is the synchronic study of the meanings of signs.
- What signs represent can be derived from the established system of social norms that exists in each societal segment. Therefore, no sign is entirely new, as it is formed from signs that have previously represented something. However, as a sign is used in new contexts, it gains new meanings, and these are not solely derived from norms.
- Whatever a sign does is dependent on the practice of the society in which it is used. For example, it may be used in the practice of storytelling on television. The broadcast or narration of a particular sign at a particular time is a new social phenomenon.
- Therefore, to understand what a broadcast communicates to a certain social segment or audience group, it must first be examined within its social and historical context.
- Signs can be used to distinguish material elements of the world in ways they have never been before. Expression through signs is the way a sign refers to a social situation and defines it for us.
- A sign is not merely a signifier of the concept it is related to; by being used in a context, it contributes to the ongoing social dialogue regarding a specific issue.
- Therefore, a sign is a "response." It is a reaction within our social life to the ongoing dialogue, providing an evaluation of the discussed topic. It only holds meaning when used in the context of human relations, and it does not carry meaning on its own through mere formalism.
- There are inevitably intellectual touches in its analysis and, consequently, evaluation.
- Therefore, it is a concept defined within a relationship: this is the relationship between the use of the sign and the dialogue it responds to (i.e., the topic it defines).
- Although the specific direction of the response in the dialogue may seem evident, the real purpose of the response (whether to oppose, defend, or dismantle) is open to interpretation by the audience based on the idea presented. Every new expression requires a new interpretation.
- The same text, when placed in a different context or dialogue, can transform into a different signifier. It has been re-emphasized without altering its form or has gained a completely different social meaning.
- The fact that every expression is emphasized with a tendency toward evaluation implies that the sign must carry an intellectual activity.



- The understanding of the sign's use by the audience must involve reactivity; in short, to understand the meaning derived from the dialogue and response means that a third party, hearing the conversation, interprets the evaluation in the sign. Ultimately, to understand means to enter a social conversation or dialogue and make one's own judgment.

Kristeva does not accept the concept of meaning as "a system of signs" but instead describes it as "a process of signification" (Moi, 1995). Teresa de Lauretis, building on Eco's concept of semiotics (Eco, 1996) and incorporating Kristeva's ideas, questions semiotics in her essay 'Semiotics, Theory and Social Practice' (Lauretis, 1991). Here, semiotics is more akin to Marx's concept of history: if semiotics is understood as "the story of humanity's pursuit of purpose, (Kristeva, 2024)" then signs develop with the intention of fulfilling those purposes, not from a pre-established system. There are also other signs outside of language for communication. Roy Harris highlights the distinction between "segregationist" theories, which presuppose the existence of a common system of signs between two individuals, and "integrationist" theories, where signs are created within and by the act of communication itself (Harris, 1996). The first theory separates the system of signs from the user, while the latter believes that signs gain meaning only when used in a context for human purposes. As Harris notes, all linguistic theories since Saussure have been segregationist (Harris, 1996). This also distinguishes the approaches of Peirce and Bakhtin. By adopting Bakhtin's approaches, Kristeva developed a theory linking signs to the fundamental motivations that inspire human behavior and, ultimately, to history (Kristeva, 2024).

Barthes proposed that signifiers not associated with a specific, known concept could distort meaning; more explicitly, they could provoke a reaction in the form of opposition to contradictions or general concepts. Barthes also noted that reactions to these disconnected signifiers carry emotional value, describing this as an evaluation (Barthes, 1977). This statement reveals his connection to Bakhtin's perspective through Julia Kristeva. Bakhtin also argued that a speaker makes "a personal emotional evaluation" based on the meaning of their spoken words (Holquist, 2003). Kristeva was the first to take the step towards the "semiotics of the text (Kristeva, 2024) However, even behind her theories lie Bakhtin's views. Kristeva remarked, "I reinterpreted a writer who was being republished in the Soviet Union. In Eastern Europe, a writer whose works form a synthesis of formalism and history: Mikhail Bakhtin (Pechey, 2007). She explains the act of signification as a "process of limitless and independent creation." (Kristeva, 2024), emphasizing that the process of signification does not remain confined to existing systems of signs but creates ways of understanding our world with limitless outcomes .

With this term, Barthes' concept of "dialogue" indirectly demonstrates the influence of Bakhtin on Barthes, even if it is not explicitly stated (Holquist, 2003). Indeed, the assumption that signs represent a world we are familiar with may be based on what we now refer to as "'traditional semiotics' (De Saussure, 2004)." Barthes recognized that some signs do not represent concepts related to the world in any way (Barthes, 1977). In a broadcast that addresses the public, such as a television play, signs cannot present any social segment detached from reality and without the slightest critique (Holquist, 2003).

This study has been analyzed by employing Bakhtin's dialogic semiotic analysis method. examined through dialogic semiotic analysis. This method adopts a dialogic approach to decipher the meanings of discourses and signs in language (Eco, 1996). It focuses on the dialogue between two or more parties and analyzes how the signs used in this



dialogue function, how they are interpreted, and how messages are structured (Holquist, 2003). This analysis also takes into account the social, cultural, and linguistic contexts of the signs. The *Cracker* series will be interpreted within this framework.

## 2. Reflection of Reality in Naturalism: *Cracker* TV Drama Series

*Cracker* is a British crime drama series created by Jimmy McGovern, which aired for a total of three seasons and 25 episodes between 1993 and 1995 (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0105977/>, 2025). The show starred Robbie Coltrane and Geraldine Somerville in leading roles. The reason for selecting *Cracker* for this study is its complex and intriguing narrative, which stands out as a foundational text for many recent television dramas, particularly from an era when TV programming was relatively limited. The series is recognized for its naturalistic portrayal of reality, which is assumed to have influenced contemporary TV productions. The show's main character, Fitz Fitzgerald, has inspired both domestic and international productions that were later praised by critics. Characters like Tony Soprano in *The Sopranos*, Detective Rustin Cohle in *True Detective*, Detective Stella Gibson in *The Fall*, Don Draper in *Mad Men*, and Chief Inspector Behzat in *Behzat Ç.* are influential texts in their exploration of naturalistic realism.

Gerry "Fitz" Fitzgerald is an unconventional detective and a brilliant psychologist. To pay his bills, he teaches at universities, runs a small clinic in a mini shopping center, and hosts his own radio show. Fitz struggles with addictions to alcohol, gambling, and smoking. He also has extramarital affairs and faces significant issues with his wife and children. Despite his personal flaws, he has a remarkable ability to delve into the criminal mind, making him indispensable in solving difficult cases. Fitz steps in for challenging investigations.

This study focuses on specific episodes of *Cracker*, including *Mad Woman in the Attic: Part 1 & 2* and *To Be Somebody: Part 1, 2 & 3*. The reason for selecting these episodes is that the character of Fitz and the narrative contain a rich variety of content in a dialogic manner.

### 2.1. The Relationship Between Character and Meaning

In the series *Cracker*, Fitz reflects a real-life figure. Psychologist Ian Stephen, much like Fitz, is a detective who makes assumptions about murder cases and interviews convicted killers. Stephen has mentioned that his work requires sharing emotions with criminals, but he refuses to share the horror of a crime. Robbie Coltrane and Stephen collaborated extensively, and they co-authored an article published in *The Psychologist* magazine. Ian Stephen noted that these collaborations significantly contributed to the image of his profession, and real details were used in a naturalistic approach through these works, making the drama appear authentic. For instance, Fitz is warned by the police during an interview with a suspect due to his intimidating attitude and behavior, as such conduct is prohibited by law in the interrogation of suspects.

It is stated that real forensic reports share many similarities with detective novels. In the series *Cracker*, Fitz reflects a real-life figure. Psychologist Ian Stephen, much like Fitz, is a detective who makes assumptions about murder cases and interviews convicted killers. Stephen has mentioned that his work requires sharing emotions with criminals, but he refuses to share the horror of a crime. Robbie Coltrane and Stephen collaborated extensively, and they co-authored an article published in *The Psychologist* magazine. Ian Stephen noted that these



collaborations significantly contributed to the image of his profession, and real details were used in a naturalistic approach through these works, making the drama appear authentic. For instance, Fitz is warned by the police during an interview with a suspect due to his intimidating attitude and behavior, as such conduct is prohibited by law in the interrogation of suspects.

Fitz is equipped with specialized knowledge that ordinary people cannot possess, enabling him to solve cases. His craft lies in using this expertise to arrive at solutions that are presented in ways the general public can understand; however, the audience knows they would never reach the solution without Fitz. As in semiotic analysis, once the solution is revealed, it appears obvious and acceptable, yet the methods leading to it require expertise. In a sense, the detective figure has been reinstated as superior to the audience, as in earlier times.

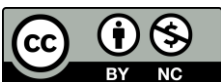
In *Cracker*, there is a human side to Fitz, but in the back of his mind, there is always a criminal profile. Motivations serve as a pathway to “solving” the case: they lead to the criminal’s confession but do not appeal to their conscience. The contradiction in *Cracker* lies in creating a criminal profile based on objective factors, such as the societal environment in which the criminal was raised, while the cases are often rooted in much more personal causes. The social application of this concept ties into the phenomenon of collective therapy.

When horrifying and malicious murders occur, the public’s initial reaction is typically fear. Uncovering the reason behind the incident provides a sense of relief by opening up a dialogue about the event. This fulfills people’s need to talk and express their emotions. Additionally, discovering that the murder was committed by someone with an abnormal psychological state gives the audience a sense of comfort, as it reassures them that such dangers are not an everyday threat.

The *Cracker* episode *To Be a Somebody* exemplifies a type of drama that unsettles its audience. Viewers do not want murder to be treated merely as a problem to be solved; they want it to be acknowledged as *murder*. The social function of collective therapy here intersects with a discussion on social justice. In this episode, a killer commits a series of murders to avenge the innocent people who died at the Hillsborough football stadium disaster.

The societal application of this collective therapy is linked to the widely recognized feelings of resentment toward authorities who refused to take responsibility for the causes of the tragedy. This drama transcends critical naturalism; it poses a question to the audience: can the victimization of those in desperate circumstances serve as an excuse for a particular attitude or behavior?

Detective stories often conceal certain assumptions that need to be identified. Michael Westlake states, “The public may sympathize with the criminal, but it cannot sympathize with the crime” (Lapsley, 2024). The detective is accepted as the person who *must know* unacceptable thoughts. This perspective has historically resulted in personal issues for many detectives, such as broken marriages and struggles with alcoholism. Fitz was created during a period when McGovern believed there was a need to return to a form of humanism. He described the era of the 1980s, marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall, as ‘a time when I was left with the collapse of everything I had believed in my whole life and the realization that they were lies.’ (<https://www.denofgeek.com/tv/cracker-the-drama-that-taught-hbo-everything-it-knows/>, 2025). Fitz reflects this era, investigating aspects of life that people had previously been unwilling to confront.



Fitz is an enlightened member of the working class who, according to McGovern, has abandoned the pretensions of intellectualism, believing that “not everything is defined by slogans or bound by ideologies (<https://www.denofgeek.com/tv/cracker-the-drama-that-taught-hbo-everything-it-knows/>, 2025). What matters, he believes, is what a person genuinely holds dear in their heart and soul (Day-Lewis, 1998).

In many ways, Fitz is “greedy.” Bakhtin argues that naturalism connects personalities through a single tendency, such as “appetite,” while limiting other characteristics (Mandelker, 1995). However, Fitz transcends this simplicity, embodying much more complexity. Naturalism discourages deriving meanings from broader, dialogic interpretations. Examining television dramas, on the other hand, reawakens dialogue, strengthening and complicating the text, often making it ambiguous or opaque. As a result, Fitz is portrayed as a flawed and fallible human being.

The image of an actor like Robbie Coltrane, who presents a particular persona in society, features a black-and-white shot of him as Fitz, staring intently into the camera. The smoke rings above his head exaggerate the demonic quality of his steady gaze. However, the ash on his cigarette has grown three centimeters long, highlighted by a high angle shot, and is about to fall. This moment distracts the viewer’s attention from Fitz’s terrifying facial expression. A person in control wouldn’t allow the ash on their cigarette to hang like this. Nor would someone as intense and focused as Fitz, especially during a tough interrogation. This small detail undermines his severe demeanor. His indifference to the cigarette’s ash undoubtedly reflects a facet of his personality, yet we cannot fully grasp what this signifier represents independently from the rest of the image. The cigarette and its extended ash engage in a subtle dialogue with Fitz’s chilling gaze, contributing to the overall effect. It forces us to balance our attention between his facial expression and the rest of the image, shaping the entire picture. In this context, the cigarette with its long ash exists solely in the meaning discussed above. You cannot look up its meaning in a semiotic “dictionary” to understand it.

In semiotics, a theoretical approach that includes what Barthes refers to as the poetic function of signs is necessary (Barthes, 1977). Volosinov describes poetry as “a pressure chamber for value judgments that cannot be expressed with words” (Volosinov, 1973). The end of a play is not a true ending; it is merely an emotional moment that stands in for a proper conclusion. The story ends in a certain emotional state, but the film’s ending is not the final explanation of the facts. Barthes implies that a new sign emerges with the signifier; he avoids placing the entire use of signs into a system and categorizing it (Barthes, 1977). Saussure’s semiotic approach cannot explain such a situation through any normative theory (De Saussure, 2004).

According to Volosinov, the dominant class attempts to give signs an “eternal identity” by suppressing their multiple emphases (Volosinov, 1973). This denies the hidden history within a sign. “The contradiction hidden in every ideological sign only becomes evident during periods of crisis (Volosinov, 1973) The Cracker as signs stand out dialogues. It is natural for us to focus on a single use of a sign that concerns us in our daily lives. This is why it is so difficult to delve deeply into naturalism in television dramas. Returning to the ‘Cracker’ example, the ideological impact of the event is not immediately apparent because it has been cleverly designed to incorporate different ideological perspectives. The reactivity of understanding encompasses the above-mentioned idea. The desired reaction is the evaluation of the inner dialogue. Throwing wine in someone’s face is a reaction, but does this reaction express a “lack of communication”? This is an interpretation that portrays Fitz as guilty. Perhaps it is a reaction



to a display of masculinity. In his efforts to push for a more political approach to semiotics, Keyan Tomaselli argues that "the media is a perfect environment for the battle of signs" (Tomaselli, 2022). These should be seen as contested signs, highlighting the ambiguity of what is intended to be conveyed. Volosinov opposes the notion that meaning, intention, and implication come with the sign itself, as if they are inherent, rather than being shaped by use (Volosinov, 1973).

Wittgenstein mentions that a drawing can be perceived as either a duck or a rabbit at first glance, depending on how it's viewed (Gorlée, 2012). This is the "birth" of a form. A shift in perspective brings about a new interpretation, occurring simultaneously with perception (Gorlée, 2012). This concept aligns with Bakhtin's idea of "reaccentuation" (Pechey, 2007). Bakhtin suggests that the same sign can be given an entirely different meaning (Pechey, 2007). The function of the sign resembles Wittgenstein's notion of visual perception. In reality, watching television can be considered a "form of thinking" because it involves a particular aesthetic attitude. The producer proved that Pastorelli had the talent to carry the role by delivering a convincing performance in the resolution of Coltrane's character in the film. This serves as an excellent example of Robert Stam's concept of "celebrity intertextuality" (Stam, 1989).

## 2.2. Script and sign levels

John O. Thompson observes that different approaches can be applied to text analysis in television dramas, drawing from Raymond Williams' works (Williams, 2013). He states, "In the works of Williams, which can be expressed at the level of 'general semiotics,' entire plays or groups of plays are analyzed" (Williams, 2013).

However, in most semiotic studies, visual-auditory texts have been read as a collection of norms. Bakhtin argues that a play is a form of expression, and that all norms within the play should be understood as parts of this whole. In Bakhtin's view, a published work is the general act of meaningful social action. We cannot understand a sentence by looking up each word individually in a dictionary. We think of the words in relation to the content of that sentence. Thus, for Bakhtin, the sign used does not have a fixed, standardized meaning; rather, it changes depending on its context—meaning it is interpreted based on its general use or the content of what it conveys (Bakhtin, 1986).

Fitz is shown drinking at a gathering after the funeral of a deceased female police officer. At the start of the drama, a dialogic connection is established between two men, Fitz and Roberge. Fitz gets drunk, confronts the other officers, and blames them for the female officer's death. He shouts, "Incompetent fools!" and even accuses the chief, who is at the peak of his career. The relationship between a person's profession and their sense of self-respect is immediately brought to the forefront. Once someone achieves recognition in their career, they may even resort to unethical actions to maintain that reputation. This is a form of modern mythology.

The "poetic" tone of this narrative continues as Fitz asks the chief, "What is the dilemma of sacrifice?" Fitz speaks about the virtue of selfless behavior but points out the contradiction in sacrifice—if we consider the sanctity of the victim, then sacrifice here results in harm to



someone sacred. Thus, the act of sacrifice inherently involves a paradox. The chief's professional success, as Fitz suggests, has come at the cost of certain sacrifices.

When Fitz's father is introduced, we see him as a former soldier who expresses the expectation that his grandson will follow the same career path. He criticizes Fitz for his son's indecision about his career. Fitz responds, "I'm not raising a soldier here, Dad." Ironically, Fitz's own struggles and insecurities seem to stem from his father. A father who continues to blame a grown man for failing to raise his son properly reinforces this impression. Fitz, however, supports his son's hesitation and believes he should not rush into choosing a career.

Fitz's method is often based on the premise that even criminals sometimes don't fully understand what they have done or why they did it. The "solution" to a case typically comes when these individuals confess something they have suppressed about themselves. In the case of the murdered young girl, the suspect Roberge had previously spoken about his admiration for ornamental fish. He describes feeling pity for the fish, which he had seen in a jar as a child, because they lacked any privacy. He recalls begging his mother to place the fish in a pond. Fitz reveals that the girl's body being found in a fishpond betrayed him. For Roberge, the pond symbolizes freedom—a place to escape the glaring media spotlight. Fitz explains that placing the body there represents a moment of conscience for Roberge.

The signifier here is that the fishpond, which made Roberge unhappy and tied him to a life full of theatrical roles, also symbolizes the girl's liberation into a free environment. At this moment, Roberge breaks down and confesses to his crime.

Fitz curses Roberge, as he does with all the killers he has encountered, for his extreme sensitivity. In *To Be a Somebody*, this sensitivity becomes both a defining trait and a flaw. The episode is heavily inspired by Ian Stephen, particularly in how it portrays individuals who hold their emotions in high regard and fiercely protect them, making it highly likely for such people to sacrifice others.

From a dialogue perspective, Coltrane's portrayal of this inverted role exemplifies an excellent instance of intertextual exchange, targeting a contemporary audience. The drama cleverly subverts expectations by placing Robbie Coltrane, known and loved for a particular type of role, into an entirely different and contrary character. Repeated lines throughout the episode serve as examples of reinforcement, demonstrating how the same words can take on different meanings in varying contexts.

### 2.3. Sign levels within the context of racism

*Cracker* is an example of bringing a new approach to intellectual analysis in the late 20th century. Certain social norms are used to create meaning. For instance, the exploitation of Black women as a class is a well-known norm.

It contains a reference to colonialism and class divisions. It tells the story of a police investigation searching for the truth behind a murder committed by a working-class laborer. Unexpectedly, the narrative reveals a character who is both exceptionally good and entirely selfless.

The term *Cracker* originates from the United States, where it was used by enslaved people to describe the whip-cracking overseers who supervised them in the cotton fields. Over time, the term underwent semantic broadening and began to be used by African Americans as a



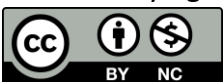
derogatory term for white people in general (<https://eksisozluk.com/cracker--31952?p=4>, 2025) .

In a particular episode titled "*The Mad Woman in the Attic*" of Jimmy McGovern's "*Cracker*" series, a young girl, one of Fitz's psychology students, is brutally murdered on a train. Deeply affected by the incident, he takes it upon himself to track down the killer. Logically, the police must inform the girl's family of the tragedy. However, before this event, we see Fitz in a restaurant, where a woman is singing the song "*Summertime*." It carries a painful irony: this traditional lullaby, which speaks of parental love, is abruptly cut off, and the scene transitions to the morgue, where the parents identify their deceased daughter. While a lullaby typically conveys comfort to soothe a crying child, in this dark irony, the young girl has been tragically murdered. The melody of the song accompanies the slow-moving camera, heightening the emotional tension.

During these two events, Fitz's personal life is also reflected. In the restaurant, he orders wine with his wife and a couple they are with. The song continues to carry the irony: Fitz, burdened with deep inner pain, goes about his daily life. The camera focuses on his face from various angles as he harshly criticizes his friend's wife for certain mistakes. He starts giving unsolicited advice, suggesting that as a working woman, she should hire a maid to take care of the children and clean the house. Fitz insists that she can't escape her contradictions by distancing herself from home and getting lost in her ambitions. During this aggressive outburst, the camera shifts to show the puzzled reactions of those around them. Fitz primarily criticizes his friend's wife for hiring a Black maid while herself stepping out into the streets to earn more money by giving "*Women's Education*" lectures. Simultaneously, the camera focuses on the Black waitress approaching to serve Fitz. In a fit of helplessness, Fitz starts yelling even more, and the woman across from him throws wine in his face. She, too, has "unraveled" under Fitz's fierce attack. Fitz, in his excitement, exclaims, "There's a communication breakdown here!"

Throughout the scene, the music continues, highlighting Fitz's own contradictions: while his beloved student's family is suffering, he is enjoying himself in a restaurant. While criticizing the lives of others, his own conscience doesn't seem to trouble him much. The camera once again focuses on the Black waitress approaching the table. The woman asks for the bill, and Fitz hands over his credit card. The irony here is that the waitress realizes Fitz's card has been canceled and tells him she cannot accept it. She addresses him as "sir" but in a cold tone. The other man at the table takes care of the bill. Fitz finds himself humiliated by a woman he treats—or is perceived to treat—like a servant. He is caught in yet another personal contradiction. A Black woman is serving him, yet it is she who ends up humiliating him. The term "Cracker" originates from the phrase "crack the whip," used by slaves in the United States to describe the whip-wielding overseers who supervised them while picking cotton in the fields. Over time, its meaning expanded, and it came to be used by African Americans as a derogatory term to refer to white people in general.

The se words, Black woman's ironic use of the term "sir" when addressing Fitz shows that she is unable to grasp the message Fitz is trying to conveyechoed in some famous television films, suggest that the woman is unable to grasp Fitz's message. He is merely trying to convey that intellectual contradictions are inevitable: we are all caught in this web of thought, unable to step outside and fully understand the struggles of others from our own higher vantage point. What needs to be understood in this scene is that Fitz's attack on the woman is not personal; he is trying to illustrate the unavoidable consequences of being caught up in intellectual



abstractions. Althusser notes that we are all chasing after an ideology, making it impossible to make neutral decisions: "As is well known, one always criticizes others for being trapped in an ideology but never oneself" (Althusser, 1971). Cracker is a series that takes up and develops this theme. Fitz, despite his deep internal pain, continues with his daily life. This demonstrates that the very contradiction he criticizes in others also exists within his own behavior.

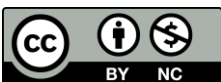
In this scenen season 1 episode The Mad Woman in the Attic, the multiple layers of meaning can only be understood when we view them as signs. It is necessary to identify the elements that convey meanings beyond the straightforward, commonly accepted understanding of physical or material realities. In this context, the waitress is not merely chosen to serve a functional role; she also symbolizes an ideological contradiction. The traditional theories of semiotics, starting with Saussure and Peirce and applied by Barthes, demonstrate that signs can be understood through systems of norms (Gorlée, 2012). Norms are thought to function, in a sense, as rules that point to a determinant, such as social conveniences or a label for a concept, in a way, act as societal conveniences or as rules that point to a determinant, like a label for a concept. In the example above, we are unable to name a specific determinant for this sceneepisode. Instead, we are carefully analyzing, identifying, and interpreting the events. By doing so, we assign a unique significance to what unfolds in the film, treating it as a new way of uncovering distinctions within our daily lives.

## Conclusion

Semiotics is open to interpretation; suggesting multiple meanings for signs based on the context at hand, but it does not strictly tie these to a specific context. Through Bakhtin's process of re-textualization, a sign can acquire a completely new flow of discourse and acquire new meaning. The key aspects of television dramas, as explained in the examples mentioned above, can be summarized as follows: Signs in television dramas do not exist within a fixed system; multiple signs can be assumed within any framework and can create meaningful dialogues between distinct systems, such as melody or visuals. The moment a television drama is broadcast, and its position during a period of cultural change, playplays a crucial role in the creation of social meaning through that same drama. Signs can alter their meanings based on where and when they are used. The usage of norms within a show must be acknowledged within the context of how they are utilized and their impact on social dialogue throughout the play.

Truly, indirect expression in semiotics is entirely a process of normalization. This is because it is impossible to present reality directly without alteration or distortion. Saussure's theory of semiotics, therefore, serves as a valuable resource supporting this view. Social phenomena act as "rules" to help viewers understand what they see, not as reality, but instead as a norm. Television dramas differ in their exploration of reality, not in terms of realism, but in terms of semiotics. In naturalism, television incorporates the triadic functions of icon, index, and symbol, but these appear as a unified whole (Williams, 2013).

It is ironic to think of television dramas as easily and immediately understandable texts without the need for semiotic norms. Yet, semiotics achieves something entirely foreign to the postmodernist approach: it shows that a text can be situated within dialogues, thus allowing it to transform into real situations and events. The b based on this idea, the postmodernist argument can be summarized as follows: any attempt to return to reality will be incomplete because there is no reality independent of the way it is presented, whether in



audiovisual media or in literature. Once we realize that everything we perceive as real is fundamentally a construct, we must give up the pursuit of what is really real. postmodernist debate can be summarized as follows: any attempt to return to "reality" is clumsy, because whether in visual-auditory media or literature, there is no reality independent of its mode of presentation. Once we understand that everything we perceive as real is fundamentally a construction, we must abandon the pursuit of the truly real.

The most obvious point in relation to media theory is the relationship between open-to-interpretation semiotics. There is a distinction between the theory that signs carry fixed meanings and that they offer multiple interpretations. Open-to-interpretation semiotics further suggests several meanings for signs based on the context at hand but does not strictly rely on those contexts to define their meanings.

## Explanations

\* **Ethics Committee Approval:** Since no human factors were used as research subjects in this study, ethics committee approval is not required.

\* **Publication Ethics:** This study has been prepared in accordance with the rules stated in the "Higher Education Institutions Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Directive." Additionally, the article has been scanned using plagiarism detection software (Turnitin / iThenticate), and no plagiarism has been detected.

\* **Author Contribution Rate:** Not applicable.

\* **Conflict of Interest:** The author(s) of the study, the institution(s) they are affiliated with, or their financial supporters do not have any direct or indirect financial, commercial, legal, or professional relationships/interests with other institutions or employees of these institutions that could influence the research.

\* **Academic Financial Support:** The study has not been supported by any academic financial support organization (TÜBİTAK, BAP, European Union, United Nations, etc.).

\* **Author Declaration:** The study has not been derived from any thesis and has not been presented at any congress/symposium/conference.

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